

BURMA - May 2010, 3rd

World Press Freedom Day

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2nd Cyclone Nargis anniversary

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a european support demonstration at Trafalgar Square

for the still affected population and 20 volunteers in prison
including ZARGANAR, comedian and film director, sentenced to 35 years in jail
for sending information about cyclone Nargis to foreign media.

Free Zarganar !



<http://zarganar.blog.free.fr>

Free Zarganar !

FREE
ZAR
GAR
NAR
CAMPAIGN

Nargis – Haiti : from denial to international assistance

A historical disaster. The junta refused any humanitarian assistance for 25 days.

In Bangladesh, on April 29, officials requested farmers to hurriedly finish harvesting the rice crop ; in India, the Meteorological Department recommended that fishermen should not sail on the ocean during the passage of Nargis and warned the Burmese agencies and the World Meteorological Organization of the impact and severity of the cyclone, two days ahead. In Burma, the authorities neither warned nor evacuated the population in time and cut the communications.

Cyclone Nargis hit Burma on 2008, May 2. The damage was considerable: 450 000 houses were completely destroyed and 350 000 were seriously damaged; in the planting season, fields, tools and seeds were destroyed ; at least half the public schools were damaged or destroyed, the remaining schools were used as shelters ; 75 % of rural hospitals and health centres were lost. On July 17, **the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated the final death toll at at least 140 000, making Nargis the worst natural disaster in the recorded history of Burma.**

For three weeks, the government rejected offers of international assistance and blocked access to the Ayeyarwady delta at the time when survivors most needed food, shelter and access to medicine. Government officials also blocked private domestic donors from distributing aid in the delta. Some authorities conditioned aid and assistance on survivors' voting in favour of the government's draft constitution on 24 May, and on their willingness to work or join the army. Some soldiers and local government officials confiscated, diverted or otherwise misused aid intended for cyclone survivors. World Food Programme's Paul Risley said the delays were "unprecedented in modern humanitarian relief efforts". On June 2nd , one month after the passage of Nargis, half of the victims of the cyclone had received no assistance, and the military junta's blockade of aid remained significant. On June 4th , four U.S. Navy ships left the Burmese coast after being denied entry for several weeks, taking its aid back undelivered.

Two years after the cyclone, 160 000 households are living in makeshift shelter. The people need everything.

Nearly 800,000 homes were destroyed or damaged by Cyclone Nargis, leaving only 16,000 houses or 2 percent intact. UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) data shows that as of mid-January 2010, nearly 160,000 households had yet to receive shelter assistance of any sort, and were living in makeshift shelter such as tents. Many Nargis survivors rebuilt their homes after the devastation with temporary material. Between \$4,000 and \$5,000 had been spent on each home rebuilt in the 2004 Asian tsunami-affected countries such as Indonesia and Sri Lanka, using bricks and concrete. By contrast, in Myanmar, donors provided an average \$400 to rebuild a house. To date, only 30,938 houses have been rebuilt by the UN and NGOs, and another 30,000 have been built by the government. Cyclone Nargis prompted an appeal for US\$691 million. In total, \$215 million has been committed : the Myanmar's domestic political situation makes it among the lowest recipients in the world of overseas development assistance. Nargis damaged or destroyed paddy crops, fishing gear and commercial enterprises. People need income opportunities. They need jobs, they need employment, they need boats and fishing nets, the agricultural sector is extremely short of cash and credit. ¹

Thousands of cyclone-affected households in the delta are falling into a debt trap because job opportunities are still few : 83 % of sampled households reported being in debt because they had to buy food. Interest rates vary from 5 and 20 %, others between 25 and 50 %. Though interest rates are high, the cyclone-affected debtors find it difficult to borrow money unless they can find loan guarantors in their villages. ²

1 United Nations, Office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs, 28/01/2010 IRIN, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/SHIG-825H6J?OpenDocument&emid=TC-2008-000057-MMR>

2 The Irrawaddy 26/10/2009 – Drowning in debt http://www.irrawaddy.org/highlight.php?art_id=17068

Press freedom : from repression to international reconnaissance

June 2008, the comedian and film director Zarganar committed himself beside the Cyclone Nargis victims, and testified. 65 years in jail !

Many Burmese people made donations and / or participated in collecting food and cleaning up. The junta thwarted the volunteers' effort : the cyclone-affected area was closed by the military who ordered them to leave their supplies to be distributed by the army. Some volunteers were turned back, others made "a gift" to the soldiers to go.

Zarganar led a group of 420 donors and volunteers, he had mostly recruited himself. **From May 7 they started going into the Delta, crossing the roadblocks and checkpoints.**

Zarganar testified: in an interview ³he pointed that, a month after the disaster "There were no UN or NGOs there yet, and they had received nothing. Our private group gave them what we had. The most horrible thing was that they had no water to drink and collected water when it rained. We gave them 10,000 bottles of drinking water". He criticized the management of the crisis, including the fact that the UN accepted to be limited by the junta. "I am not happy with the UN. It doesn't seem able to reach many of our people. The UN and NGO staff must work under the eye of the regime. That's a problem. Why are they so concerned with the government's endorsement of their relief work? They should have taken more risks. Even if they can't go without permission, they could assist volunteers like us who are willing to go to the villages. There are a lot of groups like us assisting refugees"

In an interview with British television BBC 2 he raised the idea of a "revenge", led by the Burmese authorities against the population.

As a film director, Zarganar shot videos. They showed the extent of the damage. They were intended to allow the future donors to evaluate the likely needs of the victims..

On June 4, in the morning, Zarganar was arrested at his home in Rangoon.

In November 2008 Zarganar was sentenced to 65 years in prison. His sentence was reduced to 35 years on February 16, 2009, in connexion with the UN Special Rapporteur's visit.

Like many political prisoners, Zarganar is detained far from his family : he is jailed in Myitkyina in the North (Kachin State), a four day road-journey from Rangoon, where his relatives live.

On April 16, 2009, he lost consciousness in his cell for over two hours, but was brought only ten days later to the city hospital. Zarganar has had a history of high blood pressure and stomach complaints which began before he was imprisoned.

Zarganar is not the only one behind bars for providing assistance to victims, reporting damage or burying the dead : one year after the cyclone, they are 21 in the same situation.

February 2010, the burmese junta censors the Haiti help media coverage.

« Since coming under heavy criticism for its response to Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, the regime has been wary of reporting on similar disasters elsewhere in the world, particularly in cases where the US military has played a major role in providing relief. The high death toll from Cyclone Nargis, estimated at around 140,000, has often been ascribed to the junta's reluctance to allow international aid workers into the country in the critical weeks immediately after the disaster struck. Haiti also faced delays in the initial stages of the relief effort, these were mostly due to severely damaged infrastructure and the virtual collapse of the government. In early May 2008, as some two million people were left homeless by Cyclone Nargis, the Burmese regime pressed ahead with plans to stage a

³ The Irrawaddy 02/06/2008 – Zarganar's Relief role http://www.irrawaddy.org/interview_show.php?art_id=12448

national referendum on a Constitution it had drafted the year before, leaving victims of the disaster to fend for themselves.” notice the burmese press in exile⁴.

The newspaper interviewed a man with first-hand experience of both disasters : GOAL emergency coordinator Brian Casey arrived in Port-au-Prince three days after the earthquake hit ; he arrived in Bangkok the night after the 3.5 meter wall of water swept over the delta. “There were hundreds of people in Thailand who had come to work on Nargis. Most could not get any further. I'm talking about big organizations with a track record in saving lives. They could not get in. Once in the place, we could not get down there, therefore we had no way to distribute ourselves. We could not monitor, or evaluate, or verify that aid was getting to those that needed it. Therefore donors and governments were prevented from funding us. Despite the failings of the Haiti relief operation in general, we have already distributed more in assistance here in nine days than we did in 4 months trying to help in Burma. »⁵.

Reconnaissance for a Haitian journalist

The Haitian journalist Pedro Carel received in New York a « Shorty Award », an award that honors excellence on Twitter. The Radio 1 presenter tirelessly get testimonies in the world media, speaking of the tragedy that struck Haiti – in particular using social network like Twitter, he used to post pictures and commented video. Carel Pedro dedicated the award to his country in a short speech of 140 words. "Let us continue to use Twitter to save lives and change the world"⁶

May 3rd, a symbolic event : European meeting at Speaker's Corner

The Free Zarganar campaign mobilizes NGOs and citizens from several European countries to support the struggle for freedom of speech in Burma.

When ? 3 May, World Day of Freedom of Expression

Where ? Trafalgar Square, London. 2 p.m.

Who ? Several organisations and private citizens from Europe (Italy, France, Belgium ...) and burmese community in exile, in order to demonstrate support and solidarity to Zarganar and to freedom of expression in Burma. Colorful national flags umbrellas will highlight this « **Euro-event** ».

What ? a Burmese spectacle combining theater dance, music and comedy, given by the Burmese community in exile. Remember that Zarganar contributed to the revival of the "anyeyint" style among the younger generation.

Zarganar is also supported by Reporters Without Borders, underlining that Zarganar is "disturbing, because he criticized the privileges enjoyed by some, poverty, or corruption." RSF awarded jim (jointly with the blogger Nay Phone Latt) its "2008 Cyber dissident" Prize”.

Zarganar was awarded honorary membership of PEN Canada, which also awarded him its "2008 One Humanity" Prize; recalling that "we honor his courage and unwavering integrity asserted for years."

On October 14th 2009 the English Pen Club awarded his first PEN/Pinter Prize to both poet Tony Harrison and Zarganar (category Writers in Prison) as « Zarganar has in the past insisted that even if he is silenced, under-the-table humour will persist in Burma's taxicabs, teashops and dining rooms : Burmese people love to laugh. "

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4 The Irrawaddy 25 janvier 2010 - Ban on CNN May Be Related to Haiti Coverage http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17757

5 The Irrawaddy 25/01/2010 - Haiti Aid Response Far Better than Nargis http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17652&page=2

6 Mars 2010. <http://www.haitipressnetwork.com/news.cfm?articleID=13570>